

The Shanghai Experience and History

Remarks by

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It has now been well over half a century since we left Shanghai. Fifty years and more – that’s the better part of a lifetime: to complete our education or get our first real job, to start a family, raise children, enjoy our grandchildren, and see our parents grow old, and pass on. Enough time also to accept as normal our status of full and equal citizens after a seamless integration into American national life.

Our first reunion in Oakland took place ¹⁹⁸⁰ 23 years ago. I remember it well. As many as a thousand Shanghai survivors came together on that initial occasion. Many are gone, but even for our shrinking group with some personal memory of those years in China, recollections have become episodic and selective, and if sometimes warm, nostalgic and romantic, increasingly shrouded by the mists of a long ago past.

The fact is, of course, that our Shanghai years were anything but positive or romantic. Perhaps, though, our somewhat more benign recollections of that transforming experience of our lives are a good thing and not really surprising, because the human mind has a convenient self-defensive mechanism, a way of repressing the bad and remembering the good.

More surprising is that this brief 10-year Shanghai episode, a mere footnote in the terrible history of Nazi atrocities and selective survival, should

have become the subject of so much fascination by others. Who would have thought that our Hongkew ghetto would be the subject for so much scholarly research and a veritable flood of articles, books, films and videos. To those who know about it only at second or third hand, our story seems to hold a never-ending fascination as an odd, quixotic, fanciful and slightly fabulous emotive experience.

It's time perhaps to set the record straight and to present a more balanced picture. Like many of you, I have been asked to talk about Shanghai to many people, have spoken about it often to diverse groups in the U.S. and abroad, been interviewed more often than I care to recall, discussed it even with the most senior officials in today's China – who have constructed their own special historical recollection of those years – and, more recently, tried to reflect and to distill some meaning from it, at least for myself.

These are the questions I have asked myself and which I would briefly like to share with you tonight:

First, why were we there in the first place?

Second, how did we live there and what did it mean?

Third, are there lessons – if any – from our common experience?

Finally, is there relevance in this for contemporary problems and for the future?

I promise to be mercifully brief.

Why were we there?

Let us never forget why our parents found themselves – traumatized, stateless and penniless – in this strange, difficult, unhealthy and generally inhospitable place.

It was because a criminal regime was allowed systematically to terrorize, rob, dehumanize, cruelly expel and ultimately to murder an innocent minority of their citizens. It was because an entire nation lacked the civic courage to protest and prevent this public outrage. It was because too many participated actively in these foul deeds, while the rest – normal and otherwise law-abiding and decent people – whether because of fear, greed, ancient prejudice or mere human frailty, chose to look away. It was, finally, because the majority of citizens would only much too late learn the hard way that to allow the brutalization of a helpless group of their citizens ultimately ends in dehumanizing them all.

But there is more to be said. We were in Shanghai – against our will – because the rest of the world stood by and did nothing until it was too late and tens of millions, Jews and non-Jews lost their lives. I do not refer only to the fatal efforts to appease a criminal government whose leaders had made no secret of their evil intentions against us, their neighbors and the world. I have in mind also that virtually all countries of the world, even

those who condemned anti-Jewish Nazi atrocities in words, did much too little to open their doors to shelter us.

Do you know that the entire British Commonwealth, excepting Canada and Australia, took in only some 3,000 refugees between 1933-41? Conditions there were not propitious for taking in more, the Evian Refugee Conference was sanctimoniously told in 1938. The vast continental Canada and Australia took in only 5-6,000 each. So did South Africa.

Over nine years, the dozens of large and small countries of Central and Latin America, and the Caribbean nations admitted no more than a total of about 80,000 desperate refugees between them, and then often only after exacting a heavy price. One major reason was their pervasive anti-Semitism, which had spread like a cancer throughout the world of the Thirties.

Nor can we omit mentioning the sad failure of our own country. As a former senior official of the Department of State, I had occasion to study the record of selfishness and, yes, widespread anti-Semitism of those years, which was the basis for artificially restricting the granting of immigration visas to German and Austrian Jewish refugees like our parents. The annual German/Austrian quota under the law provided for 27,370 immigration visas annually. Only 1,450 or 5.3% were issued in '33; less than 14% the

following year. Even in the year of the November pogroms of '38, a full 1/3 of the permissible visas was artificially withheld, under pressure from xenophobic, anti-Semitic members of Congress and with the connivance of a snobbish and prejudiced consular corps leadership. Only at the last moment, in 1939 and 1940, was the quota ever filled.

Let us be clear. The United States was relatively more liberal than other countries. For that we must be grateful, and also for the change of policy during the immediate postwar years. Yet one final devastating statistic remains: the permissible total number of immigrants under the law for the years 1933-41 would have been 246,630. Actual admittance was 113,260, or 113,370 less. The half kept out just happens to approximate the number of our people who never had a chance to leave, and were murdered.

What, then, was our life in Shanghai really like? Exciting and instructive, even character-forming, perhaps; but pleasant and romantic certainly not. On balance, I see a mixed picture. Of the 17,000 survivors at the end of the war, most were effectively indigent and living at a bare subsistence level. Almost half the Hongkew refugees were either wholly or in part dependent on handouts and the trickle of aid from abroad. Several thousand were living in the Heime under fairly appalling conditions. It was, let us not forget it, for our parents an anxious, uncertain and difficult time.

There was poverty, the threat of disease and the multiple tensions that come from worry and living at unnaturally close quarters.

On the other hand, there is indeed also another and much more inspiring element in our Shanghai experience. For there were also some truly remarkable accomplishments, even in these adverse circumstances.

With preciously few resources, our little group of Germans and Austrians created a surprisingly vibrant and viable system of education for the young, developed a varied cultural life with libraries, art, theatre, music and cabarets, engaged in a strong religious revival and stimulated for the first time a fresh sense of Jewish identity in many of the highly assimilated Jews.

Speaking personally for a moment, it was a time while living with my family in a crowded single room at the back of a Chusan Road house, when I first heard the music of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, first listened to first-class lectures on history and literature, read Heine and Goethe as well as Milton and Shakespeare, and first learned something about my own heritage. Of course, it was also the time of growing up and, for the first, second and third time, to fall in and out of love – but that, I suppose was an inevitable rite of passage, irrespective of time and place.

How ironic. The Nazis alleged that Jews were aliens and not real Germans or Austrians at all. Yet German-speaking Jews were historically among the foremost carriers of European and German culture to the far corners of the world including, incidentally, the college campuses and universities of the United States – and to our Hongkew ghetto as well. Whether we recognized it then, or want to admit it today – our parents created a little community there with a remarkable intellectual component that reflected the culture of German-speaking Jewry while retaining their dignity, showing immense courage and the raw capacity and will to survive.

That, my friends, is the positive side of the Shanghai experience. For those of us who were youngsters and grew up there, that is also perhaps the most valuable part of it.

It reminds me of something the great cellist and conductor Rostropovich was quoted as saying the other day. It's a good thing, he noted, that the greatest musical geniuses often struggle in poverty and are recognized only late in life or after their death. As he put it, "Difficult times are necessary for good performance." Perhaps that applies to us as well. Perhaps the best part for us was that Shanghai was a school for life. A hard school, but in many ways a beneficial one all the same.

Which brings me to my third and fourth questions – are there lessons to be learned from the history of our Shanghai years, and are they relevant to today's world?

Henry Ford – who knew a lot about cars, but not much else – thought that history is “bunk,” and Lord Chesterfield expressed the same view more elegantly by calling history a confused heap of facts. But those are not my views. I agree with the great Spanish poet, Lope de Vega, that “to observe the past is to take warning of the future” (*Quièn mira lo pasado, lo porvenir advierte*), or as Thomas Jefferson put it, “History, by apprising men of the past, will enable them to judge the future.”

Our Shanghai history contains many lessons and most I have already alluded to. Lessons about the strength of the human spirit, about hope and courage and giving your best even when times are darkest, about the importance of community, about dignity and cultural heritage, about our Jewishness, about ourselves.

And more widely, our historical experience shows that appeasement of bloody tyrants does not work, that violating the rights of minorities does violence to us all, and that each citizen has a civic responsibility to oppose intolerance and prejudice toward any religious, racial or ethnic group, to stand up and be counted, and to have the courage to speak out even if it is

politically incorrect.

We live in dangerous and volatile times and face challenges that promise to be with us for many years to come. Dictators still threaten the peace, intolerance and fanatic hatreds still abound, and the persecution of innocent minorities remains a lamentable fact of life. Anti-Semitism continues to wax and wane across the globe. And time and again, more refugees are driven from their homes and join those millions who already languish in camps across Africa, Asia and Europe.

Whether in the Balkans, the Middle East, in Afghanistan or right here at home, there are indeed analogies here to our own experience, and we should not forget them. Nor should we despair – that too is the lesson of Shanghai.

The late George Ball, my first boss in the Department of State and later my close friend, was a wise and courageous man, but a realist too. He was fond of observing that in today's world the only viable philosophy for a person of intelligence is cautious optimism. George was right about most things, so that is a position I long ago adopted as my own.

Let us remember along with our problems that there has been a lot of progress in the world since our own refugee days. Free nations have learned the bitter lesson that appeasement does not work. The world is much better

equipped to deal with threats to peace. Democracy prevails in many more places, and the world's major nations work together better than ever before. Occasionally, bloody dictators and ethnic cleansers are even brought to trial in an International Court of Justice. New and vastly improved international machinery to care for refugees does exist and function. And as Americans, we can take satisfaction from the progress here at home – in civil rights and the relations between races, the reduction of anti-Semitism and its virtual disappearance as a factor in all our institutions, and in U.S. immigration policies as well.

And finally, fellow ex-Shanghailanders, I can report to you that it is in the country where some would have least expected it – in Germany – that perhaps the most encouraging progress of all has been made. For over the last 50 years, Germany has evolved into a Western democratic society where the right of the individual is fully protected, the first such democracy in German history.

More than four years ago, I was invited by the German government to take charge of building what is today the largest Jewish Museum in Europe, dedicated to telling the 2,000-year history of German-speaking Jewry, with all its advances and setbacks, its highs and lows, its ultimate disaster and the slow postwar rebirth of a new German-Jewish community.

I have often been asked why, of all things, I accepted that invitation. Not infrequently that question understandably comes from those among us who long ago determined not to have anything to do with Germans or Germany, ever again.

The answer is simple and for me at least it derives in part from the lessons of the Shanghai experience. Today's German leadership was born at or after the war. Their parents bear the guilt, but it is they and their children who have recognized their national responsibility to make amends, but above all to learn from the past and never to forget. A whole network of institutions dedicated to this purpose is rising in Berlin and elsewhere, – a memorial to the six million Jewish victims of Nazism, the Topography of Terror, the Wannsee Villa, the memorial sites in the former concentration camps and much more.

The Jewish Museum Berlin is one of these institutions, a federal museum sponsored and, in large part, officially funded. We are today one of the most heavily visited museums in all of Germany, with an extensive program of education for young people, research and cultural activities, and a growing network of private citizen support. Tens of thousands of Germans come every month to be with us. It is especially the students and the third postwar generation Germans who show the greatest interest, who ask the

same questions about the past asked all over the world, who are eager to learn about Judaism and who cannot understand and are deeply ashamed over what happened in their country long before their time.

I admire their commitment and that of Germany's leadership to face up to the past as no other country has done. Regrettably, Austria has not done nearly as well.

New Jewish communities are again rising in Germany. A hundred thousand Jews again live there with full and equal rights. Their number is growing and once more there are Jewish schools, hospitals and synagogues. Anti-Semitism, except for fringe groups on the extreme right, is today probably a lesser problem in Germany than elsewhere, though great vigilance is required.

So, my answer is that I go to Germany because I support what is being done there, because I want to look forward and not back, and because I am hoping that our internationally recognized institution can be a focal point for helping today's and tomorrow's Germans understand and apply the lesson of their own past.

It is Germans and the German government who wanted the Jewish Museum Berlin and support the important role it plays. That is an important and hopeful development. I am glad to support this effort because, among

other things, it gives meaning to my years in Shanghai. I invite you all to do the same – to become members of this Museum and to support us if you can. But, at least, come and see for yourself.